

Finding My Identity

Contributed by Keith Farnish
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I have found an identity.

Is that really such a big deal? The thing is, I didn't realize I was missing one. There are so many things I could call myself: a human, male, a father, a husband, a writer, a thinker, a gardener, a campaigner... so many things that I feel pretty comfortable with, yet until a couple of weeks ago I didn't realize there was something missing; something that yawned inside me, empty and lacking substance.

As consumers we feel so fulfilled; everything is within arms reach, or just a short drive down the road in the shopping mall, or on the internet by next day delivery. Everything we could possibly need. Consumers are the lifeblood of the industrial economy: it is the confidence of the mass of consumers that characterizes the health of the economy, for without an optimistic buying public there is recession, slump, depression and, finally, collapse. A perfect symbiotic relationship: the consumer has everything she wants, and the economy rises on the continued satisfaction of the consumer.

It's not quite that simple, though, because without one critical hook, the consumer will quickly start to question the nature of the relationship -- maybe it's not so fulfilling after all, given that all that hard-earned money has to keep being pumped into the rumbling belly of the infinite beast. Unless there is something more, then the consumer might understand the absurdity of this endlessly cyclical, destructive, mind-hollowing culture: we all feel that emptiness and sense of pointlessness from time to time, don't we? It doesn't last long, though, because to question the consumer culture is to question ourselves: more than anything, the consumer identifies with the culture; the consumer is part of that culture.

Consumer is more than just a word -- it is an identity.

The Consumer Identity

When I hear humans being referred to as Consumers, I get angry. Not only is it because of the obviously abhorrent nature of consumerism that I get angry, but because the word "Consumer" is such a blatantly imposed label -- it stinks of domination, of the entrapment of human beings into a single archetype; state-sponsored and corporate approved. The template for the modern human.

What kind of bloody identity is "Consumer"?

We are raised, as civilians within the industrial world, to believe there is a single mode of fulfillment that will hold us in good stead from birth to death. We must never question it; we must never challenge it; we must only identify with it. Carolyn Baker describes this crisis of identity in her book *Sacred Demise*, in the following way:

Civilization's toxicity has fostered the illusion that one is, for example, a professional person with money in the bank, a secure mortgage, a good credit rating, a healthy body and mind, raising healthy children who will grow up to become successful like oneself, and that when one retires one will be well taken care of. If that has become our identity, and if we

don't look deeper, we won't discover who we really are.

If we identify ourselves as "Consumers" then that leaves little space for anything else because, as Baker makes clear, the illusion that the civilized world creates is a lifelong one, and if we are to remain in its grip we must reject anything else that might conflict with that illusion.

There is no room for connection with the real world, the world in which we are part of the cycles of nature and the webs of life -- connection to the telephone network or the internet is the consumer way; there is no room for the breathtaking joy that comes from watching the sun rise across a beach, accompanied only by the cries of the gulls and the wash of the sea -- you have to buy the experience from a travel agency; there is no room for the exquisite tastes and smells of your own grown or gathered food made into healthy meals for everyone to share -- you can share a large bag of nachos with dip, while watching a movie on your plasma screen.

I gave up being a consumer long ago: before, I had no idea that's what I was; none of us have any idea how much of us is composed of this forcibly imposed identity... until we decide to stop being what the system makes us.

But the void is large, and the consumer identity keeps threatening to fill it with each advertisement, news broadcast, political entreaty and subconscious signal: we have to resist; we have to find something else to take its place.

Who Am I?

Not only must we find something so we are able to resist the often delicious attraction of the consumer culture, but we need something else because without identity we are less human. The evidence for this is compelling: identity from the dawn of humanity is written across the ground, the walls and the artefacts of everyone who has ever been part of a tribe or close community. The tongues of countless people have spoken, and still try to speak in myriad different languages, dialects and accents. The way we have dressed; the way we have expressed ourselves; the way we have made our lives different in so many subtle and deliberate ways shouts of the need for an identity, a commonality in our local culture that ensures the survival and enhances the success of each group that shares that identity.

I willingly retain the labels "human," "male," "father," "husband," "writer," "thinker," "gardener," "campaigner": they say what I do in part, what is important to me. They also help me to start constructing a new identity for myself, for in the absence of a tribe, or even a close community that I can become part of -- being a non-consumer in the middle of a consumer world -- finding true identity will always be a struggle. The pieces are coming together, though. I have discovered my Englishness, possibly the nearest I can currently get to a physical, tribal identity. I have the writer Paul Kingsnorth to thank for that:

Many of the people I met during my travels exhibited a solid, quiet Englishness that had nothing to do with pained intellectual definitions and everything to do with belonging to the historical landscape they were part of. This, it seems to me, is crucial. Landscape and belonging are tied inextricably together. Englishness, as an identity comes not from institutions or vague ideas about 'values' but from place.

I was born in England and I have lived here all my life. I love this country as a place, and I am content to root myself in the soil from which its life emerges. I have, very recently, also realized that a large part of what I write and speak about is rooted in Anarchy; the simple and natural concept that there is no place for arbitrary authority nor a self-selected hierarchy -- the kind that the political and corporate milieu utilize to ensure we remain good Consumers. In that sense, Anarchist is the antithesis of Consumer, and I know which identity I am more comfortable with.

There are many other pieces for me to find; some of them may shuffle around and some may come and go over time, but at least I am now able to choose my identity for myself. That is a wonderful thing, one that we owe it to ourselves to fight for.

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Keith Farnish's previous articles in Culture Change were *Time To Decide What Matters* last month and *Thinking About The Future* last April.